

## Pittsburgh Torah Scrolls Project

Our goal is to create an online exhibit of ten Torah scrolls that are currently in use in the Pittsburgh area or buried in the Pittsburgh area.

We will present this exhibit to a public audience during our last class of the semester, which will take place in a location other than our current classroom (TBA) and will be open to the public.

### What is a Torah Scroll?

In order for a Jewish congregation to hold certain prayer services, it must have access to a Torah scroll. The scroll itself is made of parchment (animal skin) upon which the first five books of the Hebrew Bible are written out. At certain points of the weekly prayer services, a designated reader will publicly chant portions from the Torah scroll.

These Torah scrolls are also considered sacred objects. If they fall to the ground, many congregations will hold a communal fast. And if they get too damaged to use and cannot be repaired, they are buried rather than discarded.

Because Torah scrolls are made out of parchment, and the words on it handwritten by a trained calligrapher, they are very expensive to commission. Because of this, many of the Torah scrolls in Pittsburgh have not been newly commissioned, but rather have long and interesting histories of moving from congregation to congregation, sometimes from continent to continent. Every one has a unique and fascinating story that tells us something important about Jewish history.

### Conducting Your Research:

Step 1: Find a research partner. The two of you will work together to research one Torah.

Step 2: On the last page of this document, there is a list of ten Torah scrolls that we would like to include in this exhibit. Along with your partner, look over this list, and choose three scrolls that you think would be particularly interesting to research. By **this Friday, January 27<sup>th</sup>**, please send me an email that includes your name and your research partner's name, and the list of the three Torahs that you are interested in. (Note: Please only send me one email from each pair of researchers).

Step 3: After getting requests from each research pair, I will assign you a Torah to work on. I will send you a list of articles, archival materials, and contact people who will help you find discover more about the particular Torah you are researching.

Step 4: Start planning your section of the online exhibit. We are going to upload our exhibit on to a wordpress site, where each research pair will be given one page to present everything they have learned about their chosen Torah.

Each page must include the following features:

- a. A photograph of your Torah. This means that you must contact your Torah's institution ahead of time and politely ask permission to view and take photographs of the scroll. Please do not contact them on Friday nights or Saturdays, when religious services are taking place. (Note: if you are researching the buried Homestead Torahs, you can just take a picture of the memorial indicating where the Torahs are buried).
- b. A map indicating where your Torah is currently located, as well as all the places where it resided before the current location. (digital humanities experts will be coming to our class to teach you how to create and embed these maps)
- c. An introduction to your Torah, which should include all of the basic facts that you know about it (location, previous locations, the main reason/s that you think it tells us something important about Jewish history). This section should be no longer than two paragraphs, and should be written jointly by both members of the research group.
- d. At least four substantive sections that will allow your audience to delve into the history of this Torah. These sections can focus on whatever you think your audience might want to know about your Torah. Some topics to consider could be a history of the Torah's current location; a history of the Torah's previous location/s; the history of how your Torah was made, found, or repaired; the history of how your Torah made it from one location to another, etc. Each of these substantive sections should contain 500-750 words, as well as a visual or audio-visual component (ie: a photograph, a short video of an interview with one of your contacts, a relevant newspaper headline, etc). Each one of you is responsible for writing at least 2 of these substantive sections, and you must let me know which sections you were personally responsible for writing.
- e. Bibliography: This section should include full citations for all of the primary and secondary sources that you used to put together your section of the exhibit.

Deadlines and Benchmarks:

- a. January 27<sup>th</sup>: send me a list of three Torah Scrolls that you and your partner would be happy to research for this project

- b. February 10<sup>th</sup>: submit a research plan, which will include an outline of your page and what you intend to focus on for your four substantive sections. Please feel free to consult with me for suggestions on what to focus on.
- c. March 20<sup>th</sup>: Submit a first draft of the text of your exhibit to me via email. I will suggest edits.
- d. April 13<sup>th</sup> (no class, research day): Upload the entirety of your exhibit to the wordpress site
- e. April 20<sup>th</sup> (last class): Public Presentation. Each of you will have the opportunity to share your research with your classmate and with guests from the wider community (we may even have a reporter attending!) Each of research pair will have no more than 5 minutes to present your section of the exhibit, and there will be time at the end to answer questions from the audience.

**FAQ:**

Q: What if we don't understand how to use wordpress?

A: Representatives from digital scholarship services will come to our class to give you pointers, and will be available for individual consultations.

Q: Will our grade be based on our individual contributions to the exhibit or will I get the same grade as my research partner?

A: Half of your grade will be determined by the quality of your individual contributions to the exhibit, and half of your grade will be determined by the overall quality of your exhibit and public presentation.

Q: Should I assume that the people visiting our exhibit know a lot about Jewish history, Pittsburgh history, or the history of Torah scrolls?

A: No. Assume that your audience has very little specialized knowledge about Judaism, Jewish history, and the history of Pittsburgh.

Q: Will you think I am super-smart if I use multi-syllabic words, a complicated sentence structure, and academic jargon?

A: No! This exhibit is geared toward a wide, non-specialized, non-academic audience. Your language should be clear and accessible.

Q: Will you be annoyed if I make frequent use of the passive voice in my writing?

A: Yes. Yes, I will.

Q: Will you be available to answer the many questions that are sure to come up in the course of our research?

A: Absolutely! I expect you to visit my office hours and to make appointments to meet with me outside of office hours. If you do not do this relatively soon, I might assume that you are falling behind with your research.

### List of Torah Scrolls

1. Torah rescued from the Holocaust (documented), currently at JCC (Squirrel Hill)
2. Torah at Adat Shalom (Fox Chapel), originally from Congregation Bnai Israel in East Liberty
3. Homestead Torahs that were burned in fire, buried at Beth Shalom Cemetery
4. Kehillat Sfarad Torah (used by Sephardic prayer group that meets in Squirrel Hill), originally from Beth Israel, Latrobe PA
5. Kollel Torah (Squirrel Hill), originally from Lithuania, via congregation in Vandergrift PA
6. Counterfeit Holocaust Torah/ Max Youlus Scandal, Congregation Beth El of the South Hills
7. Torah rescued from the Holocaust by the Memorial Scrolls Trust, Congregation Beth El of the South Hills
8. 1991 Torah commissioned in memory of Holocaust survivors, Congregation Poale Tzedek (Squirrel Hill)
9. Yemenite Torah, Kelso Museum (Presbyterian Theological Seminary)
10. Poale Zedek Torah (Squirrel Hill), donated from Beth Jacob congregation in Duquesne